

The Diving Pool and Japanese Psychological Realism
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Contemporary Literature or AP Literature
Four Day Unit

***The Diving Pool* and Japanese Psychological Realism**

Four Day Unit for Contemporary Literature or AP Literature

Lesson Objectives

- Students will be able to analyze literature for and find supporting evidence of Psychological Realism in the novella, *The Diving Pool* by Yoko Ogawa, from the anthology of the same name.
- Students will be able to discern and discuss literary elements such as tone, mood, imagery, theme, motif, symbols and figurative language.
- Students will be able to connect fiction passages to real life events.

Summary of the novella, *The Diving Pool* by Yoko Ogawa

Using a austere, emotionally remote first person narrative, author Yoko Ogawa tells the story of a woman looking back upon events of her adolescent years, spent in an orphanage run by her parents, with the discongruent name of “The Light House.” There is little light in this orphanage, especially for the protagonist. Hers is the story of a first crush, ripe with sexual innuendo about plunging and diving. Jun is the object of her affections: a seemingly bright, happy and athletic young man who is on the diving team and the one source of light in the story. She goes to the pool each day after school and “watches him from the corners and the shadows.” It is the innocence of a first crush, yet is it overshadowed with societal taboo: the protagonist has cruel impulses to hurt small children. As an adolescent in an orphanage, the protagonist has duties to look after the younger children. Her impulses to treat small children with sick cruelty start when Jun first comes to the orphanage, with a strange scene in which she pretends to be a breastfeeding mother to him. Further on, she spends time with a toddling baby named Rie. The protagonist has strong urges to treat Rie terribly, by placing her in a large urn and relishing the baby’s fear and crying. She ends up feeding Rie a spoiled cream puff and almost killing her. The novella concludes with Jun revealing that he had been always watching the protagonist, just like she had watched him. Because of this, he knew about the cruelty to Rie. The crush would never develop and the protagonist’s societal taboos were exposed to the light.

Historical/Literary Context

The author: Yoko Ogawa (b.1962) is a celebrated, accomplished Japanese author, best known in the U.S for the books *The Diving Pool*, *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, and *Hotel Iris*. Ogawa first published in 1988. All her books are written in her native language of Japanese, and the most successful of them have been published in many languages. In 2008, she was awarded The Shirley Jackson Award for outstanding achievement in the literature of psychological suspense, horror and the dark fantastic, for *The Diving Pool*. Her fiction has been published by The New Yorker, A Public Space, and Zoetrope. Since 1988 she has published more than twenty works of fiction and nonfiction, and has won every major Japanese literary award. Ogawa lives in Ashiya, Japan, with her husband and son.

Political context--After thousands of years of military dominance, Japan was defeated in WWII. It was a demoralizing time for the country and its people. This insular society was not only dealing with the aftermath of the atomic bomb, but also military occupation. The Allies who won the war (Great Britain, United States, the Soviet Union, China, etc.) enacted widespread reforms in order to ensure that Japan would be disarmed and not remilitarize. These reforms included tearing down and rebuilding almost every aspect of the country including its military, political, economic, and social structures. The Allies also discussed and enacted policies to deal with its colonies (especially Korea and Taiwan), stabilize the Japanese economy, and prevent any aggression of the country in the future. As a country, the Japanese were literally and figuratively crushed.

Environmental---Japan is known for its natural disasters. Because the country sits on top of four tectonic plates that frequently collide, disasters have come to shape its national identity and mythology, its past and its future. Earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, typhoons and volcanic eruptions have greatly impacted Japan in recent history. In addition, while an atomic bombing is not a natural disaster, the country has had to deal with the extensive environmental damage the bombing of Hiroshima wrought.

Societal--Japan is facing a population decline. If current trends continue, by 2050 Japan will have over one-third fewer citizens than it does today. Nearly one-third of today's Japanese citizens are over age 65. This impacts of this decline are far reaching both culturally, in a land where filial piety is paramount, and economically, with young people carrying the burden of the outsized elderly population. Furthermore, the reasons for the declining birth rates are elusive. Some say that young women are choosing career over family and the traditional daughter-in-law responsibilities. Others say that employment is unstable, with forty percent of workers being forced to work in freelance/consultant types of positions that do not offer regular benefits or stability of income. In addition, with so many elderly people, the proportion of taxes taken out a paycheck is huge, making many young people question their ability to support a family.

Literary--*The Diving Pool* falls into the genre of Psychological Realism. This genre portrays a literary character's thoughts and feelings without idealization. Psychological realism is a literary method in which a piece of fiction focuses on the interior motives, psychological processes, and characters' mental narratives instead of simply telling a story. Psychological realism focuses on why something happens and not just the scenario that plays out. The evolution of this literary genre in Japanese literature has three progressions:

- Meiji---psychological realism as literary revision--**content**---portraying thoughts and feelings without idealization and without reference to virtuous stereotypes (i.e. the prostitute with a heart of gold). This literary style takes stock characters

and has them less idealized. It is a move away from the moral lessons of Confucius influenced stories

- Taisho---psychological realism as literary **style**---portraying feelings without stylization, without gilding, artistry or covering up. This movement is characterized by Naturalism, which encouraged scientific detachment in writing. Confucianism is now condemned as lies. Taboo mental content such as rudeness, crudeness, irrational behavior and socially unacceptable behaviors are evident.
- Showa--psychological realism as **social critique**--portraying thoughts and feelings without idealization or conformance to social/cultural ideas. Some examples of this may be characters showing emotional or mental positivity or on the flip side, demoralization and apathy.

Discussion Questions and Answers:

How did this story make you feel?

Responses may vary. Most students will report feeling detached, removed or coolness from the protagonist. Many will say they didn't like the story because of the taboo subject of hurting a child. The topic of incest may come up because of the brother-sister way in which Aya and Jun were raised. Further discussion could be done about what the author intended the reader to feel.

Were you able to feel empathy for the protagonist? Why or why not?

Again, student responses to this will vary. Many will feel empathy for her because of her situation in the orphanage, her loneliness and the lack of attention from her parents. Some will be so appalled at her treatment of Rie that they will not feel empathy. Further discussion could be done about what the author intended the reader to feel.

Who/what was the protagonist in this story?

Aya, even though she wasn't the typical "good guy" we like to see in stories, was the protagonist.

Who/what is the antagonist?

There are two possible antagonists, although the first is more obvious and easier to defend.

Human vs. Self---Aya is battling herself and her inner demons in her struggle to find love.

Human vs. Society---Aya is battling the orphanage in which she has been raised, and her actions are a result of that failed family dynamic.

What did the main character want?

Aya wants Jun to notice her, and finds out at the end of the story that he was noticing her. She wants to be around Rie, and wants to pick her up and spoil her, but doesn't know how to do it. Overall, Aya is looking for human connection. She wants someone to notice her, to talk to her, to hold her. This is missing in her life. It may be the reason she is so cruel to Rie.

What were her motivations for the things she wanted?

Aya wanted to be loved. She wanted to be noticed and she wanted companionship. Her cruel streak arose because she couldn't have these things. She didn't know how to go about finding these things. The discussion may veer into her earlier childhood and things that were missing, causing her to become the person she is in the story.

What is the normal construction of a family unit and how did Aya's situation differ?

In modern society, a family is one or two parents and a child or children. They are a unit. In Aya's situation, she had two parents, but they were overly involved in running the orphanage and didn't notice her much. She was expected to work extra hard because she was their child. Thus, she had parents but was raised the same as the rest of the orphans. She was bitter because she had no chance of being adopted into a normal family.

What are the tone and mood of the story and how does the first person narrative contribute to both?

The tone is one of cool detachment, and of a dream-like state. It seems the first person narrator is trying to remove herself from her emotions. Even in highly charged situations, the narrator retains her calm, cool demeanor. An example of this is on page 27: "Inside, the urn was cool and damp. She flailed about, screaming at the top of her lungs. Her cries came pouring up and into me like a stream of molten steel. I gripped the mouth of the urn with both hands to keep it from toppling over and stared down at Rie's futile struggles".

What the theme of the story?

Isolation/loneliness causes madness

Children who are not shown love when young are incapable of it when older

Inside every human is a cruel streak they do not want revealed

A person likes to observe others, but does not like being observed

Karmic retribution--when you are cruel to others, the world will be cruel to you

What are some of the motifs and symbols the author uses?

Water---the diving pool, the washing of the swimsuits---signifies cleansing, renewal

The Light House---should be a place of refuge, a guiding light, a moral rightness

Light and dark---Jun is associated with light, Aya is associated with dark

Sweetness---Aya seems sweet to outsiders, but is rotten inside. Same with the cream puff.

The author uses many dualities or contrasting/contradictory messages in the story. What are some of them?

Youth, innocence vs. cruelty

First crush vs. incest

Sweetness vs. rottenness

Orphans vs. family

Light House vs. darkness of one's own mind

Hope vs. despair

Find an example of imagery in the story and discuss how it contributes to theme.

"The upstairs hall was dark, lit only by the bare bulb on the landing. The doors to this children's rooms were tightly shut. The floor was cool against my feet.

As I descended the stairs, the sound grew more distinct. I stood at the end of the longest hall in the Light House, the one that led to the underground dining rooms and spied Jun at the sink across from the bathroom, washing his swimsuits under one of the four faucets"(29).

This quotation shows the imagery of a long, dark tunnel, and the light at the end of the tunnel is Jun. He is washing his swimsuits, an act of cleansing and renewal. This imagery is one of hope, and it shows that the character is motivated by her hope that Jun notices her in the way she notices him. It contributes to the message in that Jun does notice her. However, he notices her cruelty.

"After the rains set in, mold began to grow down in the kitchen and dining room: a lovely shade of green on a leftover roll and a snow-white variety on the apple pie one of the nurses had baked three days before. The sight of a garbage pail full of this decay aroused my cruel streak again, and I found myself imagining how Rie would scream if I sealed her inside" (35).

This quotation brings imagery of mold and rot. Through describing two food items covered in mold, the reader gets the sense that everything is molding and rotting. It contributes to the theme of seemingly innocent things like a piece of apple pie or a young girl, that should be enjoyable and sweet, being rotten and dangerous. The author's word choice in describing mold as a "lovely shade of green" contributes to the sweet yet rotting theme.

How does the story show Meiji Psychological Realism in content--portraying thoughts and feelings without idealization?

There is no idealization in the main character, Aya. As a young teen girl, the idealized stereotype would be sweet, innocent, just starting to be interested in boys, eager to help others and continually manifesting good. Young girls in literature are stereotypically presented as sweet. When a character such as Aya, plays against type, it makes us uneasy. Aya is cruel, and because the narration is first person, we have no filters about her intent. This is shown on page 39: "I realized that the sweet smell of eggs and sugar and milk had been replaced by an acrid stench, like that of an unripe grapefruit. It nearly made me sick, but Rie devoured the pastry.

Her eagerness was almost painfully sweet to see”. It appears again on page 42: “It seemed all the more precious after I’d tasted deeply of my own cruelty.”

How does the story show Taisho Psychological Realism in style---portraying feelings without stylization?

The Diving Pool shows Psychological Realism through style in the development of the story and its theme of cruelty. There are no gossamer curtains covering up the intentions and thoughts of the main character. The story and the character’s thoughts and actions are raw, real and crude. It’s like a highly stylized, modern Picasso versus the American Gothic painting. One is interpretive and stylized and the other has a message that is straightforward. Characters in *The Diving Pool* are very straightforward and honest, as evidenced on page 43: “I am not sure how I would have felt if Rie had died, how I would have made sense of what I’d done. Because I had no idea where the cruelty came from, I could look at Jun’s arms and chest and back without feeling the slightest remorse for having hurt Rie”. The author’s knife-sharp realism is again shown on page 49-50: “My desires seemed simple and terribly complicated at the same time: to gaze at Jun’s wet body and to make Rie cry. These were the only things that gave me comfort”. A stylized author would have played up this crush with blushes, giggles and coy behavior. There is none of that here.

How does the story show Showa Psychological Realism in social critique--portraying feelings without regard to conformance to societal expectations?

The term social critique refers to criticism that examines the reasons for the bad or malicious conditions in a society and the flawed structure that may be behind said conditions. In *The Diving Pool*, the author is examining the lonely, disaffected, unattached child, or one who does not have meaningful connections with her parents and friends. The story could also be a criticism of either orphanages or the foster care system. Because of this lack of close connection, the main character develops a cruel streak. She herself recognizes that when she says that she is “unhooked” on this passage from page 23: “Perhaps the wounds she’d received when the hooks broke were still raw. But since I’d never been hooked to anything, I couldn’t see much difference in our luck”. The character knows what is wrong with her and recognizes it, causing the reader to feel a little bit of sympathy for her: “...these things had the power to wash me clean. I wanted to be as pure as Jun, even if only for a moment” (43). Because we can feel sympathy for the flawed protagonist, this piece works as social critique, a criticism of society and its flaws.

Class Activity: Four day unit, 50 minute class periods

Two days before: assign reading and distribute “Literary Look-fors” (see Appendix B) to be completed while reading.

Day One: Lecture: introduce Psychological Realism, brief history of modern Japan and biography of author Yoko Ogawa. Allow time for silent reading, if possible.

Day Two: Activity: Love it or hate it. Post a picture of a heart on one wall of the classroom. Post a picture of a “Yuk” emoticon on the opposite wall. As students enter, ask them to vote with their feet and go to whichever sign matches their feelings about *The Diving Pool*. Give each group a few minutes to come up with an intelligent statements about why they voted the way they did about the story. Share statements.

Follow activity with class discussion of story using discussion questions and Literary Look-fors completed work. Assign homework.

Day Two Homework activity: Students learn the relevance of what they read in *The Diving Pool* to "the real world" by connecting key quotes from the work to news photos from recent, credible news sources that echo the ideas. Due on Day 4 of unit.

How do these quotes resonate today? What contemporary connections can students find?

Students should come to class with their quotations and photos and explain findings to the class.

Exemplaries can be found in Appendix A

Day Three: Review Psychological Realism. Break class into three groups. Each group will take one of the periods of Psychological Realism, Meiji, Taisho or Showa, and discuss how it is evident in *The Diving Pool*. Each group should prepare a short presentation, speaking to their topic. Each group should provide three citations from the story, with page numbers, telling where the element is present and explain how it fits into the story. Allow 40 minutes for group work and discussion. Citations should be in a Power Point, Google Slides or other format that allows for easy presentation.

1. How does the story show Meiji Psychological Realism in content--portraying thoughts and feelings without idealization?
2. How does the story show Taisho Psychological Realism in style---portraying feelings without stylization?
3. How does the story show Showa Psychological Realism in social critique--portraying feelings without regard to conformance to societal expectations?

***sample responses to these questions are above in the questions section*

Day Four: Homework due. Groups present their findings on Psychological Realism. As a class, discuss its place in Contemporary Literature. Offer *Pregnancy Diary* and *Dormitory*, the other two stories in Ogawa's anthology, for further reading for those interested.

Students present the photos they selected for homework, orally presenting their ideas and analysis. Presentations should be brief and to the point, about 1-2 minutes.

Citations

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Appendix A

Homework exemplaries:

Quote: “When we grow up, we find ways to hide our anxieties, our loneliness, our fear and sorrow. But children hide nothing, putting everything into their tears...”(Ogawa 26)



Quote: “The light, too, seemed to have collected on us; everything else beyond the windowpane and down the hall was pitch black. We inhabited some separate, extraordinary moment in time”(Ogawa 31).



Appendix B

LITERARY LOOK-FORS---READING WITH PURPOSE

Complete this chart as you read. It will aid in your discussion of the text. Try to find two examples of each literary element.

Literary Element	Page	Write the passage or the first few words of passage if it is lengthy....
<i>Example: Figurative language--simile</i>	51	"But the mention of her name pierced me like a thorn".
	28	"...As if I'd never slept, as if I were shining brightly in the darkness
TONE		
MOOD		
IMAGERY		
MOTIF		
SYMBOL		
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE		
MOTIF		

THEME		
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